“semiocapitalism”: a period characterized by the digitalization of communication, the prevalence of cognitive labour and the financialization of the economy. Ironically, we failed to finish the interview via digital communications; after two attempts and a short Skype conversation, he was kind enough to type the rest of his answers for us.

Irmgard Emmelhainz on behalf of Scapegoat

In your new book, Heroes: Mass Murder and Suicide (Verso, 2015), you discuss the term “bio-semiocapitalism,” which describes not only how creativity, expressiveness, affection, emotion, communication and participation—the qualities of “cognitive labour”—have been incorporated as productive factors into the economy, but also how this incorporation has infiltrated the nervous cells of conscious, sensible organisms, taking hold of the collective unconscious, culture, and sensibility. This is the main cause not only of an anthropological mutation that has radically changed the ways in which we interact with each other—within increasingly competitive environments, to the detriment of solidarity—but also a cognitive mutation, which you have linked in your work to automatization. In turn, automatization is related to early language learning from machines, as opposed to from the mother, and to exposure to digital communication from a young age. In your view, what are the consequences of these mutations (cognitive and anthropological) in the realms of erotic relationships and sexuality?

Franco Berardi

Well, this question implies many levels of reflection, and I will answer in a nuanced way. So, first of all, what are the meaning and the function of these kinds of new technologies? And by new technologies I mean systemic tools for the automation of labour, and labour relations. Everybody knows what automation is in a factory, when a machine takes the place of a manual worker, but it is more meaningful when automation implies the replacement of intellectual activity, because in some way it also implies a transformation of the very emotionality of human beings. This is the new phase of automation, the phase that we are facing nowadays. We cannot imagine that such
a transformation, particularly as it concerns the entire intellectual activity, the digitalization of communication, and so on, will have no consequences, no effects on the very nature of human beings. Particularly, the more communication becomes an exchange of information through a screen, the more human bodies become accustomed to being in a distant relation. So that implies that emotional and bodily perception has changed, that they have mutated in one way or another through the processes of digitalization.

SG And how would you say that this automation of emotion affects erotic relations and sexuality?

FB Of course, I started to investigate this subject because it’s the most intimate level of the human mind, of human emotionality. But according to the practice of recent research for instance, concerning the consumption of pornography for obtaining pleasure, or about the growing dissociation of the erotic relation between people in these images, some changes can be inevitable. In the end, in my opinion, if we are not going towards the oblivion and disappearance of human bodily relations and sexual relations, we are going towards a growing disappearance of the very space of sexuality, effectuated by digital media. I mean, I imagine that people are more and more taken by mediated relations. In terms of time, it is quite simple: there is not enough time. The more time we spend in front of a screen relating to distant people, the less we live in a bodily relation with them. And this is particularly meaningful for young people who start investing their affective life in mediated social networks. I think that this is changing something in a deeper way in the human potential and vitality of our species.

SG And this is related to your notions of “connection” and “conjunction.” You discuss a further development you saw in South Korea, the “transformation of capital into semiotic processes. This means that capital accumulation is subsuming and capturing the process of production, let’s say that semiocapitalism is based on the pragmatic effects of this reduction of language to syntactic, generally speaking, the pragmatics of communication is the sphere in which words produce bodily effects, or social effects, or psychological effects at the syntactical level, when our interaction, our communication, becomes more and more syntactic and therefore formatted? This is a problem that also concerns politics, because politics changes deeply when we have to follow precise procedures or protocols of interaction transmitted through social networks. For instance, Facebook is a simulation of communication. It is simulating well, but it is still a simulation. And yet, this form of communication is extremely useful for daily life, and for political life.

SG We could argue that one of the traits of semiocapitalism is that it turns desire into signs to be consumed. In this transformation, not only is the referent lost, but also difference is levelled out. It’s transformation of everything into the same, semiocapitalism causes the erosion or the disappearance of the Other. This has radical consequences for erotic experience, but could we go as far as to say that the end of love? Would it be possible to recuperate the otherness of the Other? And how?

FB The end of love is a little bit too much, and I don’t say that sexual relations are completely destroyed in the transformation of the process of production, the process of capital organization into semiocapitalism. This means that capital accumulation is subsuming and capturing something and meaning, and so opposite of what we say, because we understand each other only through our body, thanks to our eyes, thanks to our voice. The tools, the different tools of the voice, are the pre-existing medium that creates the possibility of accessing meaning. And this is going to affect the evolution of the human mind.

SG So, conjunction has more to do with bodily presence, touching, and spending time together?

FB Absolutely, yes, conjunction means a relation between the human bodies, in the sense that they are not regular or smooth. They are looking for a possibility of contact, searching in an indeterminate in the sense of looking for a possibility, or a way to understand each other. When you enter the domain of connectivity, you’re not searching anymore, because you find [each other] right away at the beginning, because the answer is implied in the format. So I would say that connectivity is the opposite of round forms; in connectivity there are segments to be connected to each other according to a pre-existing format.

SG So it would kind of be like automation versus poetry?

FB Let’s say it’s automated language versus the voice. And poetry is the voice, bodily voice. And what is the voice? Voice is the singularity of language, voice is the point of conjunction between meaning and the body. And poetry is the same, poetry is the relation between meaning and the infinite range of possible forms of sound, of nuance, of imbriication, of irony, of the unsaid but said in another way. You know, poetry and voice are the connection.

FB When I travelled to Seoul, I was surprised by the amount of time people spend with their smartphones everywhere, in every place, they use them like shops, coffee parlours, homes, streets, etc. I was impressed, for instance, by the fact that people do not walk on the streets looking at the buildings or at the landscape because they are using Google Maps to navigate the city, the physical space around them. And as I started to investigate the subject, I came to understand that South Korea is number one in connectivity worldwide, but a very interesting point is that South Korea is number one in suicide rate, particularly among young people. I also discovered that Koreans are not historically accustomed to killing themselves; no, this is a new phenomenon. Twenty, thirty years ago, the suicide rate was forty times lower, and this has grown over the last twenty years. So I started thinking about the phenomenon of suicide together with connectivity, and I can tell you that the country with the second highest suicide rate is England, where the level of connectivity is extremely high, and the third is Japan. And so, I think that, of course, I don’t dislike smartphones, but using them immensely transforms our ability to communicate and understand each other. At the same time, I became aware of the effects of digital communication, which are psychopathological. I’m interested in the dissociation between connection and conjunction because I think that a conjunction is a relation that I call “conjunctive,” which is based on the resonance of meaning based on contact, on the erotic space, on bodily contact. And what is the connection? The connection is the structural form of the relation between the bodies, we are entering a new kingdom, a spatial relation where conjunction is replaced by connectivity. And what is connectivity? Connectivity is a form of language based on a format. You cannot connect if you do not respect the format. This is changing something because the exchange of meaning is not based on the frame or the context, but more and more on the format. This is a philosophical subject that in my opinion has to be analyzed. But in short, I can tell you that conjunction means a bodily investigation of meaning. Connection means that there’s a pre-existing format that creates the possibility of accessing meaning. And this is going to affect the evolution of the human mind.

FB If of course you are speaking of a transformation, particularly as it concerns the automation of intellectual activity, the digitalization of...
the flow of language, and therefore the flow of modernism as well. The problem of resistance, of autonomy, of the creation of common spaces is lost... [Connection was lost] I have argued that the thickening of the cultural apparatus—the sexual revolution of the 1960s—as a communal utopia—became merely a process of internalization, toward the ongoing destruction of the separation between the individual and the market, which colonized affective human existence, sex, and sexuality, now part of the digital machine, thereby causing suffering and unhappiness (Les particules élémentaires, 1998). You have argued that under sexual deregulation, love has been transformed into enjoyment, emotion, and excitation without consequence or orgasm, and that the erotic object has Multiplication to the point of becoming omnipresent. Under semicapitalism, everything is allowed and even encouraged with regards to sexuality: to seek pleasure through sex toys and sadomasochism, to experiment with different partners, to fully express and fulfill one's own sexual identity (a kind of hyper-sexual expression), what you identify as the "Just Do It!" injunction of ubiquitous excitement with no space and no time for emotional elaboration. You speak of reverse repression referring to the "Just Do It!" injunction, and the general obligation to be creative, expressive, and swift. Actually, I don't like to use the word repression, because it seems misleading to me, but if you want, yes, it's the contemporary form of compulsion. The hyper-stimulation of the sexual imagination is invested in the hairless surfaces of the digital image. The first digital generation shows symptoms of emotional atrophy: there's an impressive disconnection between language and sex. In the media, advertising, television, everywhere there is talk about sex. But sex is no more talking, as it's disconnected from language. Sex is babbling, stuttering, mumbling, or screaming in a desultory way. Words are dying out.

Emotion is the meeting point between body and cognition: it's the bodily elaboration of the information reaching our mind. The time of emotional elaboration cannot be fast (very fast) or it can be slow, but the elaboration of sexual emotion needs time. The spread of pornography has had the effect of shortening the time of emotional elaboration. In turn, porn is one of the causes of time saturation, one of its effects or symptoms. Pornography is part of the saturation of the info-sphere, and is simultaneously an escape from the disturbed psycho-sphere.

You use the expression "reverse repression." Is this a good word to describe the paradox of ubiquitous excitement with no space and no time for emotional elaboration? What are, in your view, the consequences of this thickening of the info-sphere by the increasing quantity and intensity of information reduces memory, compresses time, and produces dis-identification and the general obligation to be creative, expressive, and swift. Actually, I don't like to use the word repression, because it seems misleading to me, but if you want, yes, it's the contemporary form of compulsion. The hyper-stimulation of the sexual imagination is invested in the hairless surfaces of the digital image. The first digital generation shows symptoms of emotional atrophy: there's an impressive disconnection between language and sex. In the media, advertising, television, everywhere there is talk about sex. But sex is no more talking, as it's disconnected from language. Sex is babbling, stuttering, mumbling, or screaming in a desultory way. Words are dying out.

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other as a competitor. Solidarity in fact is not only a political or moral value; its condition of possibility is empathy.

SG In a world in which competition is the general form of social relation—bringing about dissociation, alienation, fragmentation, and, as you put it, ‘lonely togetherness and shared isolation,’ as well as a crisis of emotional self-perception and perception of others—cynicism, self-contempt, and contempt for others are prevalent, as opposed to empathy (which you define as self-love). Presented with this landscape, you have emphasized the need for collective therapy. In your view, what are the grounds for cultivating ethical behaviour in a social environment in which precariousness, randomness, impermanence, instability, and transient interpersonal relations prevail?

FB I don’t know. Frankly speaking, I don’t know how we’ll overcome the present situation of emotional distress, social isolation, and political impotence. For the moment, the experience of the last decade of social movements is showing that workers are unable to overcome this condition. The experience of Occupy—just to name the last massive experience of social rebellion—has clearly stressed this point: we reclaim urban space as a possibility of reactivating a long-lasting process of self-organization. SG Negativity and difference, which are the conditions of love, have been obliterated by the libidinization of the economy; desire has been subjected to the formula of consumption, which implies that the I seeks in the Other a confirmation of the self, just to name the last massive experience of social rebellion—has clearly stressed this point: we reclaim urban space as a possibility of reactivating a long-lasting process of self-organization. The consequence of this obliteraton of the perception of the Other’s vulnerability is the spreading violence and aggressiveness that are ever more prevalent in social life.

SG In your recent essay ‘The Neuroplastic Dilemma,’ you mention the need to reverse Freud’s trajectory from language and sexuality to neurology. How are the changes in language and sexuality brought about by semiocapitalism affecting or transforming the way in which cognition operates, under the light of cognitive organisms currently being forced to adapt to intolerable social and working environments? Why is it important to posit this development as “neuroplastic,” as opposed to a cultural phenomenon?

FB Speaking of neuroplasticity I don’t intend to deny that the present transformation and the ensuing pathologies have a cultural genealogy and are cultural phenomena, nor do I deny that they have to be faced on a socio-cultural basis. I simply want to investigate the effects of the techno-social environment on the hardware of the neural system. Following the suggestion of Catharine Malabou, I think that in neurological trauma we may also find the possibility of redefining the relation between our mind and the techno-environment. The concept of neuroplasticity has an ambiguous meaning. On the one hand, it refers to the flexibility and adaptability of the conscious organism, the precondition of neoliberal exploitation. But on the other, it also opens the way to the possibility of a conscious and therapeutic transformation of the mental dimension, and of the very activity of cognitive workers.

SG What kind of therapy (or line of flight, or Chaosmosis) do you envisage to counter the negative force of these anthropological and cognitive mutations? How could networked activity be “eroticly recomposed” so as to provide an autonomous organizational platform for the general intellect beyond May ’68’s communal utopia?